Too Few Black Male Educators

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ABSTRACT

In the United States, schools and universities have too few Black male teachers. Although many factors contribute to this significant problem, one primary factor is the existing lack of Black male educators to serve as role models for Black male students. This literature review captures information from peer-reviewed research, public scholarship sources, and empathy interviews. The purpose of this literature review was to understand the reasons why so few Black males are successful in school and why there are so few Black male students pursuing careers in education. Based on the literature review, the following themes were identified: a lack of financial resources, a lack of a sense of belonging, a lack of role models and mentors, and institutional racism. Colleges need to consider these issues and determine ways to support Black male students in school and encourage them to pursue a career in education. Increasing the number of Black male educators is one central way to increase opportunities among Black students. To change this narrative, one needs to acknowledge the deficit of representation is due to the system itself. Black males are not lacking in achievement. American schools are exclusive and racist in how they provide opportunities for Black males.

KEYWORDS

black males, educator, role models

INTRODUCTION

"To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time."

- James Baldwin

The lack of Black men as educators and its impact on Black male student success is a challenge that continues to plague American society. Higher education does not recruit, retain, graduate, or employ Blacks at the same level as their White counterparts (Glenn, 2003; Hughes et al., 1998; Jones, 2019). If there were more Black male educators, Black boys would see themselves in roles of authority and could be inspired to take similar paths (Underwood, 2019). Shared experiences, shared culture, and shared backgrounds contribute to creating a trustworthy environment for students that provide a glimpse of what the future could be for students themselves (Lynch, 2016). The failure to address the scarcity of Black male educators contributes to the expansion of the equity gap and resulting social injustice issues (Underwood, 2019). In the context of this article, the term "educators" refers to individuals within the confines of a typical school building, such as principals, administrators, teachers, and coaches. In the United States, Black men make up less than 2% of the teaching population (Underwood et al., 2019). In addition, there are three times as many Black students as the number of male Black teachers (Dinkins & Thomas, 2016; Lewis & Toldson, 2013). Unfortunately, this number does not look likely to increase soon. In 2013, the U.S. Department of Education reported that only 9% of the students enrolled in teacher preparation programs in 2009-2010 identified as Black, amounting to 1-2 Black candidates in each cohort on average (Bryan & Williams, 2017).

The Black Lives Matter Movement, founded in 2013, saw a drastic resurgence in 2020 and has helped shed light on these systemic inequities that many Black Americans face, especially Black males. Following the May 2020 death of George Floyd, activists took to the streets and social media to articulate the injustices that Black Americans regularly face. Reverend Al Sharpton (2020), a pioneer of the American civil rights movement and activist, spoke at Floyd's funeral, "[Black Americans] are not fighting some disconnected incidents. We are fighting an institutional, systemic problem that has been allowed to permeate since we were brought to these shores and we are fighting wickedness in high places." Activists like Sharpton, through the Black Lives Matter movement, have highlighted the ways that systemic racism permeates Black American lives. Black people in the United States face normalized discrimination from the top-down; they are more likely to be underinsured and misdiagnosed in the health care system, face a disproportionate amount of police brutality, historically misrepresented and suppressed by the government, and shunned by fellow citizens (Gara et al., 2018). Because of this overwhelming pervasion of racism in American culture, the education system is no exception; Black students and educators across the country are thus vulnerable to marginalization, ostracization, and discrimination in

public institutions. As police brutality and murders continue unchecked without an end in sight, Black people are reminded of their second-class status in America. Injustice extends to education because of the impact it has on the way educators teach and children learn (Yull, 2018). Often, we learn and teach by example. The example America presents is one of dehumanization, violence, and greed (Yull, 2018). Black people often face the brunt of these atrocities.

Black men are endangered in American society. This affects Black boys and their perception of themselves because police authority hunts them at a higher rate than the average citizen (Edwards et al., 2019). Black men face a 1 in 1000 chance of being murdered by the police (Edwards et al., 2019). They are also two times more likely to be killed than men of other ethnicities (Edwards et al., 2019). These distressing statistics are mirrored in our schools, where Black students are three times more likely to be suspended or expelled in K-12 institutions than White students (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Furthermore, students who are suspended or expelled are three times more likely to enter the incarceration system (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Children going from school straight to prison is widely known as the "school-to-prison pipeline."

In their study conducted at North Carolina A & T State University, Graham and Erwin (2011) questioned why Black male teachers are underrepresented in education. Their analysis identified three themes reflecting why Black males are dissuaded from pursuing a career in education. They found that Black males have (a) negative perceptions of teaching, (b) beliefs that schools are oppressive institutions, and (c) a vision of black males as nonconformists (Graham & Erwin, 2011). These research themes are factors explaining why Black males view schools as an unsafe place and potentially explain why Black men are less inclined to become teachers.

As evidenced by the recent Black Lives Matters protest, the United States is unfair to the Black man (Anderson et al., 2020). If the system that governs all U.S. citizens is the same system that imprisons the Black man and shows that they are not treated fairly, it is clear how these disparities in education produce the small number of Black men employed in corporations, government, and education. Thus, the not so rhetorical question, why would Black males go into education, if there are no real examples of Black men having significant positions of authority (Sommeiller & Price 2018)? Metaphorically, the Black male teacher is like a unicorn, they are myths because of their scarcity. This lack of presence throughout our educational settings has a negative impact on young Black male students (Wolfman, 2021). This impact of Black males being underrepresented or not represented at all as educators contributes to Black students not seeing themselves as future teachers or educators (Department of Education, 2016).

Black teachers are more likely to be familiar with the cultural needs of Black students (Underwood, 2019). Black male teachers and students across the board are looking for diversity and inclusion to help foster a welcoming academic life that maintains and protects their own identity (Hughes et al., 1998; Madyun et al., 2013; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015a). Thus, diversity and inclusion initiatives within the education profession could mitigate the tension of Black males feeling less than their White counterparts or their peers. The hope is that once we see more Black male educators, Black students will identify with those who look like them and feel a sense of inclusion as opposed to exclusion, especially on our college campuses.

On U.S. college campuses, Black men make up 3% of the overall faculty (McFarland et al., 2018). This number is low compared to White men, who comprise 40% of the faculty population (McFarland et al., 2018.). Representation is a key factor in supporting enrollment and graduation of Black men (Eunyoung, 2013). This disparity is disconcerting given that in 2018 it was reported that Black students make up 12.65% of the total undergraduate enrollment population (McFarland et al., 2018), while White students encompass 52.4% of the population. How do we inspire more Black students to enroll in college? We contend the answer is more Black men as educators. Nationally, the U.S. Department of Education indicates that 11.5% of Black men will drop out in their first year of college (de Bray et al., 2019). By year three, 48.9% will have left the community college without a certificate or degree. Black males have consistently had the highest post-secondary dropout rate among every racial/ethnic and gender subgroup (Wood, 2012). Sixty-eight percent of Black males who start college will not complete their curriculum within 6 years (Center for Community College Engagement, 2014). This academic disparity puts Black men at a disadvantage when seeking employment. In compiling this literature review, the researcher found that 30% of the working adult population (25–64 years old) holds a post-secondary credential compared to 18% among Black adult men in the workforce (Baber et al., 2015). Black men are underrepresented in higher education, accounting for less than 6% of the entire U.S. undergraduate population in 2010 (Aud et al., 2012).

Black male teachers are needed for the formation of a better society, and there are not enough Black men majoring in education (Rezai-Rashti et al., 2010). From 2016-17, only 1,514 Black males were conferred degrees in education compared to 12,087 White males. In 2017-18, that number was even lower with 1,470 Black male's conferred degrees in education compared to 11,087 white males (de Brey et al., 2019). More Black teachers are needed to intervene with the racist status quo of public schools and to serve as role models for Black students (Maylor, 2009).

METHOD

To identify and ultimately synthesize the hurdles Black men face when trying to graduate college and pursue careers in education, the researcher conducted a literature review including searches of library databases, publicly available websites and publications, and also conducted empathy interviews of Black males and their experiences in education. The results included the identification of themes that served as the foundation for this article. This search criterion was focused on exploring the barriers Black men face in the educational system.

Library Based Research

The parameters of this research included demographic and career search terms centered on Black males and education careers. The initial research utilized Academic Search Premier, ERIC, and Psych Info databases with the following search terms: African American males OR Black males AND educators OR teachers OR education, AND community college OR two-year college OR junior college. Only articles with full-text access were included because the inter-library loan was not available due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This search yielded 224 articles. After limiting the search to articles published in the past 10 years (2010-2020), there were 121 articles. A title review focused on ensuring that the article related to the need for and challenges related to the lack of Black male educators resulted in 103 articles. An abstract review using these criteria resulted in 92 articles. After reviewing the full articles using these same criteria, the final number of articles reviewed was 59.

In identifying the 59 articles reviewed, the researcher used exclusionary rules which exempted studies that looked at Black women and other People of Color. Additionally, the researcher drew sources from peer-reviewed studies for most articles cited. However, not all the research was peer-reviewed. The researcher chose to include non-peer-reviewed research because these sources provided original perspectives on the problem of practice. For example, the article "Why America Needs More Black Teachers" by Kimberly Underwood was not peer-reviewed but was written by a leading voice in the field of education. Underwood's ethos ultimately influenced the researcher to include her article in the literature review.

Public Scholarship Research

In addition to the traditional library research-based literature review, the researcher also identified and examined a wide array of publicly available websites for community colleges, higher education, and K-12 advocacy groups and research centers. These sites provided a vast amount of information and data for the researcher to consider. The websites reviewed included: The Community College Research Center (CCRC), Achieving the Dream (ATD), Complete College America (CCA), Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE), The National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE), National Education Association (NEA) and The Black Teacher's Project. Seven articles from these sites were included in the review.

Empathy Interviews

To gain a personal perspective about the challenges facing Black males in the educational system, interviews with three males who were not attending college were conducted. Participants were chosen based on previously existing relationships with this researcher. The researcher had served as a mentor to each male over the years and had provided positive interventions in support of these young men's lives. For example, one of the men was dealing with the problem of homelessness at the time of the interview. The researcher used the opportunity to introduce this young man to a professional contact who could direct him to housing resources within the local social service agency. As researchers, our positionality must be active and not passive in the lives of the people we study (Holmes, 2020). The goal is for many Black men to be enrolled in educational programs and eventually become teachers. For this goal to be accomplished, researchers must have a "boots on the ground" mentality, meaning that they must always be ready to distribute their resources and help, not just with school issues, but real-life issues that plague so many Black males (Strayhorn, 2016). While interviewing these young men, the researcher asked four questions to capture a portrait of their lives: (a) How did you decide what to do after high school? (b) Who and what influenced this decision? (c) Why aren't you currently in college? and (d) Are you planning to go to school again?

It is important to acknowledge that interviewing acquaintances presents a set of limitations. The researcher could view the participants from a biased lens because of their existing relationship (Ross et al., 2019). This could lead to biased responses that are influenced by the way the researcher perceives the participants. Another limitation of this study is the social-desirability effect. The social-desirability effect refers to when people portray themselves in a better light to be more socially acceptable (Latkin, 2017). The social desirability is often a catalyst for the self-reporting bias, where people choose to include or exclude certain materials that will portray them in a better light (Latkin, 2017). The social desirability effect works in conjunction with a self-report bias to present a potentially skewed presentation of the participants.

RESULTS

The review focused on helping the researcher gain a better understanding of why so few Black students are successful in college and why so few pursue education. The goal was to identify the major factors or themes contributing to this problem. The major themes identified were (a) lack of financial resources (i.e., poverty), (b) a sense of belonging, (c) lack of role models/mentors, and (d) institutional racism.

Lack of Financial Resources (Poverty)

Money was a common theme preventing Black males from completing school. When it comes to financial opportunities, racism is a barrier to Black men earning enough money for any type of post-secondary education (Watkins et al., 2016). While less than two-thirds (63%) of white graduates from public schools borrow student loans, four of five (81%) of Black graduates do (Huelsman, 2014). In a study on education debt, 65% of Black respondents were in debt, while only 49% of White respondents were in debt (Grinstein-Weiss et al., 2016). A burden that contributes to these financial issues is that many Black students have family financial obligations that require them to work while in school. According to Wood (2012), the lack of financial resources and the pressure to contribute to their family were key factors in Black males dropping out. In his essay "Who is Qualified?," Stokely Carmichael (1966) asserted that regarding colleges and universities, the financial barrier is too high for the poor even with state schools, which are exclusionary when it comes down to the price of attendance. This was consistent with what the researcher discovered in the empathy interviews. The idea of graduating from a community college in two to three years is not a reality for many Black men (Kim, 2014). A young man the researcher interviewed simply could not afford community college despite his passing grades in high school and desire to learn. If students cannot afford to graduate college, let alone go, how can they become teachers?

Black men in community colleges are more likely to be low-income than their White counterparts (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2014). This drastically affects enrollment, retention, graduation, and opportunity for employment. Students without financial concerns were able to persist longer in universities and community colleges (Hughes et al., 1998). Lack of financial resources affects enrollment in a variety of ways. Students who need to work while in school often become part-time students (Carnevale, 2019). Part-time students are more likely to drop out of school (Glenn et al., 2004). Additionally, when a student is under financial

stress, they may be forced into a position of discontinuous enrollment (Glenn et al., 2004). Discontinuous enrollment refers to when students take gaps between their education to save up money. In fact, 40% of Black students reported that they needed extra time to finish their degree (White, 2020). According to White (2020), 70% of Black students are under financial stress. The research supports the conclusion that the disproportionate dropout rates for Black men is due to financial stress, which deters the population from becoming educators. Without a doubt, this is a problem that needs to be addressed.

While conducting the empathy interviews, the researcher observed that one of the young men's main priorities in life is "making money" and being "as independent as possible." Unfortunately, Black men are often excluded from the financial opportunities afforded to their White counterparts (Love, 1993). Another interviewee from the empathy interviews was experiencing homelessness. College was not this young man's main priority— survival was. The researcher can conclude that if we want an equitable opportunity for Black men in the educational system, we need to give this population the necessary financial backing.

Sense of Belonging

Black males on community college campuses come in with a sense of not feeling as though they belong. According to Dr. Demond Hargrove, this is a form of *imposter syndrome* (personal communication, July 30, 2020). Imposter syndrome can be defined as a collection of feelings of inadequacy that persist despite evident success (Ferguson, 2020). Imposters suffer from chronic self-doubt and a sense of intellectual fraudulence that override any feelings of success or external proof of their competence (Corkindale, 2008).

As reported by Achieving the Dream (2022), nearly two-thirds of all students who enroll in community college test below college-readiness in math and/or English. Of these students, 50% place two or more levels below college-readiness in at least one subject area (Achieving the Dream, 2022). Each of these women and men enrolls in college with the intent of attaining a degree, yet 72% of them will not graduate, even after eight years (Achieving the Dream, 2022). Evidence suggests that the high number of students testing into developmental coursework has a disproportionate impact on the Black males' experience in regard to feeling like he belongs in college (Kuh et al., 2006).

In their study of campus racial climate policy, Hughes et al. (1998) reported that only 54.4% of Black students graduated from that state's high school system compared to 74% of their White counterparts. The researcher concluded that this low graduation rate and its negative reinforcement of the system not supporting Black male students contributes to their sense of belonging. As such, scholars have come to the consensus that strategic, data-driven, and institution-wide efforts are needed to address the issues that hinder the success of men of color in higher education (Baber et al., 2015; Harper & Kuykendall, 2012; Wood et al., 2015).

Black males face unique difficulties on a university campus. Schools that are supposed to be welcoming environments have increasingly turned into unwelcoming environments for Black bodies (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). How could one expect these young men to feel welcomed? Kim and Hargrove (2013) reported that researchers are beginning to look at factors such as self-efficacy, campus engagement, and the ability to cope with campus racism in promoting Black male student success. It has been suggested that

these factors have far more impact on Black male retention rates than previous educational experiences (Kim & Hargrove, 2013).

The research suggests that Black males are either shunned or feel detached from mainstream campus life (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). This shows how colleges and universities fail to engage their Black male population inside and outside of student life. This results in Black male students missing engaging or enriching educational experiences (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). These students also have a harder time feeling included and relating to their peers and professors because they cannot relate their own experiences within the college environment. As such many drop out (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). To help Black men with enrollment, retention, graduation, and employment in the education system, institutional leaders must focus on promoting engagement initiatives as a catalyst for student success (ASHE, 2014).

One empathy interview especially focused on their lack of belonging as a minority male on a college campus. The young man felt disillusioned with community college professors who "talked at him for an hour" with no personal relationship. He felt he was being "pushed along" in school. He also felt that classes were mundane, and he was embarrassed by the success of his peers. In essence, community college would not allow this young man to be himself, which contributed to him dropping out. From the interviews and research, the researcher believes that colleges and universities must improve their campus racial climate in regard to student belonging if they want Black men to succeed.

Lack of Mentors and Role Models

This literature review is dedicated to highlighting and evaluating the potential benefits of mentoring interventions to improve the academic success of Black males. Some benefits reported were reduced health-risk behavior, improved academic outcomes, social-emotional wellbeing, mental health, interpersonal relationships, and racial identity (Hargrove, 2014). Across the board, researchers have called for innovative and culturally responsive intervention programs to enhance Black male academic achievement (Hines et al., 2022). The Benjamin E. Mays Institute (BEMI) uses mentoring as an intervention to counter the effects of academic barriers for adolescent Black males (Ali, 2015). BEMI succeeds in doing this by building an Afro-centric model that relies on mentoring from role models and focuses on students' cultural strengths (Ali, 2015). According to Ali (2015), students in the BEMI program have had significantly greater academic success than their non-mentored peers (Ali, 2015).

Interest convergence stipulates that Black people achieve civil rights victories only when White and Black interests converge. (Shih, 2017). Higher learning institutions are seen as "natural sites" to observe this theory because unjust access to quality education ensures White social advantage (Shih, 2017). To combat this, some schools have started to implement programs geared towards their minority students, especially their Black male students. For example, one such champion is The University Systems of Georgia (USG). In 2002, the USG initiated a research study with qualitative and quantitative data at three institutions (Perry-Johnson et al., 2003). They conducted this research because in 2000, the USG verified that their own institutions had a low percentage of Black male enrollment compared to the percentage of Black males in the population. In addition, they found that Black females outnumbered Black males 2-to-1, even though the population for Black males and females were

similar (Perry-Johnson et al., 2003). The purpose of this study was to identify the barriers to college graduation and attendance for Black males (Perry-Johnson et al., 2003). From this study, recommendations were provided on how to increase enrollment of Black males as well as to improve retention rates. One such recommendation was the creation of the African American Male Initiative (AAMI). The goal of AAMI is to increase the recruitment, retention, and graduation of Black males within the university system through strategic interventions. They created a 52-person task force that was divided into six subcommittees that would tackle the issues that specifically affected Black males. They also partnered with 10 other institutions granting them $10,000 each to be used towards programs for Black males. One of the outcomes from this initiative was an increase in Black enrollment. Starting from 2002, the enrollment of Black males has climbed by 84%, from 17,068 in Fall 2002 to 31,413 in Fall 2017. In addition, the number of bachelor's degrees conferred rose from 2,294 in 2003 to 3,079 in 2018, which is a 137.94% increase (USG, n.d.). Finally, the number of programs at the USG that focused on engaging young Black men on their college campuses increased from 3 programs in 2002 to 26 programs in 2012 (USG, n.d.). USG showed that by taking the time to analyze and understand the plight that Black males face in the educational institutions, and these interventions helped the institutions to better prepared to assist these Black males.

Institutional Racism

Institutional racism as a concept was initially introduced by Stokely Carmichael and Hamilton. In *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, Carmichael and Hamilton (1967) wrote that institutional racism "originates in the operation of established and respected forces in the society" (p. 4). The unfortunate reality is that after 64 years, the United States is still unable to deconstruct the forces of institutional racism that inhibit equal opportunity, especially when it comes to the Black male (Crenshaw, 1988).

Racism in the United States is not a past phenomenon. In fact, the researcher's assertion is that racism dominates the nation's infrastructure and is ultimately the fundamental reason why Black males are not becoming educators. Racism is so common in the United States that researchers are more surprised by its absence than its presence (Ladson-Billings & Tate 1995; Levin et al., 2013; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015b; Solorzano et al., 2000). Black males are exposed to more violence than their peers (Haggerty et al., 2013). Black males do not have the same access to healthcare services as their peers (Noonan, 2016). Kim and Hargrove (2013) suggested that these inequalities are the result of systemic racism often found in historically White institutions.

Black men experience unique stressors in the college environment (Linzy, 2016). Race-based stress can be defined as the psychological response to racism or the past experiences of what they have witnessed or the coping behaviors (Polanco-Roman et al., 2016). Over time, students develop strategies to reduce the distress racism brings; however, these strategies may be a barrier to academic success (Polanco-Roman et al., 2016). Black males may cope by taking school less seriously (Lewis, 2016). The reality is that the stress of racial discrimination can explain the gaps in academic performance between the Black male youth and their White counterparts.

The belief and reasoning for the lack of Black male teachers is due to the overwhelming racism they have experienced in school

(Sandles, 2020). One young man interviewed mentioned that he felt isolated in school after experiencing racism. He described the experience of this racism as a "disability." Thus, his experience provides an example of the need of Black male educator. If this young man had the influence of a Black male educator perhaps his educational experience would be positive, and he would not be deterred from his pursuing education (Linzy, 2016).

CONCLUSION

This article intends to shed some much-needed light on the factors that contribute to the few Black males pursuing careers as educators. These factors include poverty, a lack of a sense of belonging, the lack of availability of role models or mentors, and existing institutional racism. As noted, Black males in the United States continue to be disproportionately subject to poverty, undereducation, violence, and institutional racism. This plight is well documented in numerous journals, books, and the postings on social media outlets depicting these events often in real time. The hope is that this focus on the lack of Black men as educators and its impact on Black male student success can prompt interventions that promote role models and mentoring programs. Such programs need to be developed and expanded to addresses some of the challenges to promote careers in education as a sustainable model for Black male self-empowerment.

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